



EFFY ALEXAKIS AND LEONARD JANISZEWSKI



Ma Allatt, Katoomba, NSW, 2007 Photo by Effy Alexakis, from the 'In their Own Image: Greek-Australians' National Project Archives; NSW, late 1940s, Photo courtesy N. Raftos, from the 'In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians' National Project Archives; NSW, 1934, Photos courtesy L. Keldoulis, from the 'In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians' National Project Archives; Effy Alexakis touring exhibition 'Selling an American Dream: Australia's Greek Café'. Photo by Effy Alexakis, from the 'In Their Own



was a Trojan horse bringing in Americanization to this country. That's a new aspect and a new way at looking at Australian history: it's no longer simply British history, but becomes a history of how different ideas were brought into the country by different people including the Greeks and what impact they had on this nation, but also on the world. Because Greek Australians took the idea of the milk bar and the coffee shop to New Zealand, England, even to the USA.

When the journey begun, were you surprised in any way on finding out how big a contribution Greek Australians had on mainstream Australian culture?

E.A. We were indeed hugely surprised. But also very disappointed that this contribution hasn't been recognized. And that's why we continue doing it, I think. People are often shocked and surprised, even insulted we call it the "Greek café", sometimes pointing out it wasn't just Greeks that ran them. But from our research, a lot of them were Greeks.

WHITE AUSTRALIA AND GREEK CUISINE

I remember talking to a Greek family in

rural NSW and they were telling me they used to serve "Australian" food to the public, and only treating people like the mayor, the bank manager, the lawyer and the doctor of the town to Greek specialties. Is this something that happened across Australia?

L.J. Essentially Greeks used mainly steak and eggs, mixed grill and so on, mainly because of the influence of what we call "white Australia" and its leaning towards Britain. They introduced the Americanism because that was white culture and not as exotic. They certainly had great difficulty when they tried to introduce Greek food which they would eat in private at home. For instance baklava wasn't introduced until the 1930s. That has some degree of success and they were some parts of Australia where Greek sweets were being sold. In regards to main meal dishes, the answer is no. We are not aware of anyone that sold them commercially for a long period of time. Food served in Greek cafes was essential British Australian based, mixed with American elements.

E.A. Sometimes regular customers would see Greek food and deem it nice, but it was never part of the menu.

Yet at the same time, Italians managed to

penetrate mainstream Australian cuisine. Someone once told me that had to do with the fact they used to mingle with Australians in Catholic churches. How true is that in your experience?

L.J. In actual fact both Greek and Italian food did not emerge from behind closed doors until the 1970s and 1980s. There are various reasons for that: Australia was a closed society that did not travel much. With the introduction of commercial airlines more Australians started travelling and so began being introduced to the broader world, instead of the isolation we had here in before. Because we have such a growing population of non-English speaking people, we had their items being imported. So there was a market here for it. Commercial outlets such as supermarkets started stocking those products.

E.A. I haven't heard the argument about Italians and Australians mingling in church. In regards to Greek restaurants, they did not emerge until the 60s and 70s. Once we started travelling around, we saw that the cafes were called "The Niagara", "The Monterey", all these American terms. So we thought "what else American were they bringing in"? The American influence was done in a very discreet way. Until you look at

the bigger picture, people didn't notice the Americanization.

Basically what we have here is an influence as a product of a need to survive, rather than something carefully constructed.

E.A. In essence Greek cafes were popular because they were the only place people could go and get their meals. It was the time before pubs and supermarkets started opening. As some of the people we interviewed put it, the saying was "see you at the Greeks".

I presume there are still a lot of aspects of Australian history still kept under wraps.

E.A. Young people especially don't know anything about the Greek café. They might know a few milk bars that have survived in some of the suburbs, but mention the Greek café and they don't know anything about it. They have all disappeared and they are a part of Australian history that hasn't been recognized.

How far did you have to travel to get a story or a photo?

E.A. We have driven around the country a few times. Physically you have to go out there. But even when we go on holidays we are still looking